

BEFORE EVENING COMES

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by Philana Imade Omorotionmwan

*In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body -  
it is heritage.*

*-Ta-Nehisi Coates*

*"Heads" he stays and entertains,  
"Tails" he goes to jail*

*-Nikky Finney*

*Every Negro boy... realizes, at once, profoundly, because  
he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must  
find, with speed, a "thing," a gimmick, to lift him out, to  
start him on his way. And it does not matter what the  
gimmick is.*

*-James Baldwin*

CHARACTERS

- MARY            a mother in her late fifties; hopeful despite everything because she has to be; black
- TOTOME         MARY's son; pronounced Tot-uh-me; a boy seven days shy of thirteen; still full of the light of youth; black
- JAMES          a government employee in his late fifties; broken by success; black
- RACHEL         JAMES's wife; a woman in her mid-thirties; 4-5 months pregnant; resisting in the best way she knows how; black

PLACE

The United States. Though we might just as easily be in South Africa or Palestine. Or England. Or Germany. Or any other place where the invented "other" has been painted as a threat to public safety.

TIME

The possible future.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Though he is only twelve years old, TOTOME should be played by an adult actor. After all, the murderers of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in 2014 both justified their actions by claiming the boys "looked much older."

When RACHEL has monologues and/or announces the year, she should address the audience directly. For the scenes of which she is not a part, she might watch the action for a moment before exiting. Ideally, RACHEL resides in a space that places her above the level of MARY's home.

Rhythm is very important in this play. Not only in the tap dancing, but also in the language. Line breaks are intended to indicate this.

Scene 10.

*(JAMES and RACHEL's bedroom. RACHEL alone. Her hands are still on her stomach. She sings a lullaby.)*

RACHEL

All ten fingers and all ten toes,  
I counted them twice just to be sure.  
My baby's perfect, yes indeed.  
And won't go through life on his knees.  
All ten fingers and all ten toes,  
I counted them twice just to be sure.

*(She speaks.)*

I want you to be.  
A boy.  
Not a girl like I say.  
A boy.  
The boy I see and hear in everything.  
In the flattop fade of that six-year-old jumping off the  
swing.  
In that boy young-enough-to-still-potty-with-mommy asking  
questions.  
Like "What is that?  
Why is that?  
How does it do?  
Mommy? Mommy? Mommy? Why isn't the sky green and grass  
blue?"  
Bedtime stories.  
Tucking you in...  
I could learn to mother.  
You could teach me to be a child again.  
But little boys grow up to be big men.  
This is the most obvious reason against your being of all.  
I want to.  
But I—

*(JAMES enters.)*

You're home late.

JAMES

The interview lasted longer than I expected.

RACHEL

How was it?

JAMES

Routine.

Except that the juvenile belonged to a girl I grew up with.

RACHEL

And she has a son who's of cutting age?

JAMES

I thought maybe he belonged to her youngest. Or what used to be her youngest anyway, but... the boy is... hers.

RACHEL

Aren't you going to ask me about the doctor's appointment?

JAMES

Of course. I'm just...

RACHEL

Distracted?

JAMES

Yes. How was it?

RACHEL

Routine.

JAMES

Is everything okay with the baby?

RACHEL

So far.

But then they always start off okay.

JAMES

This time will be different.

Promise me, Rachel.

RACHEL

You were right, you know.

JAMES

About what?

RACHEL

It's a boy. Like all the others.

JAMES

I only make boys. And then I make men.

I want to meet this one, Rachel.

RACHEL

It's the same doctor.

JAMES

Not the doctor. My son.

I want to count his ten fingers and ten toes.

I want to rock him to sleep in my arms.

Be his first word.

Catch his first step.

Watch him learn to walk.

RACHEL

Then run?

JAMES

Yes! And then fly!

RACHEL

Only to find himself trapped in a cloud with his wings clipped?

JAMES

It won't come to that for our son. I told you my boss—

RACHEL

Can't be trusted. And what about everybody else's sons? What about the son of your friend? Will it come to that for him? [Or was he perfect?

JAMES

He has all ten fingers and all ten toes. And a smile that looks just like m...

RACHEL

But the rubric still found a way to fail him, right?

*(A moment.)*

JAMES

And what if it does come to that? Does that mean he should have never even take a breath in this world?

RACHEL

Do you feel like you're breathing in this world, James? In the way a man, a human is meant to breathe?

Do you remember what you talked to me about on our first date?

JAMES

That was a long time ago.

RACHEL

Flying dragons.

JAMES

There's no such thing.

RACHEL

The draco lizards, James. The ones that can fly.

JAMES

They don't really.

RACHEL

You started talking about them and I thought, "So that's why this man is still single."  
You went on and on about how the lizards couldn't always fly. But that they had to evolve, to adapt. In order to get away when snakes tried to catch them. Because sometimes throwing off their tails just wasn't enough.  
So the lizards decided—

JAMES

I know what they did.

RACHEL

The lizards decided they were going to stay up in the treetops and learn how to fly.  
And they did.  
And now they do.  
They stretch their ribs so wide that they turn into wings. But our son would never be able to breathe that wide in this world.

JAMES

Huuuuuuuh.  
Haaaaaaa.

RACHEL

Our son would never be able to breathe that deep.

JAMES

Huuuuuuuh.  
Haaaaaaa.

RACHEL

And there will be snakes all around him. [Including one tucking him in every night.]

So James, knowing that, how could I let him—

*(RACHEL feels the fetus kick again. Her hand goes to her belly. After a moment, JAMES places his hand over hers.)*

JAMES

Huuuuuuuh.

Haaaaaaa.

Here, breathe with me.

Huuuuuuuuuuuh.

[You're right. We've been holding our breath. But we can't let go of our breath until you let go of your breath.]

*(A moment.)*

RACHEL

Haaaaaaa.]

RACHEL and JAMES

Huuuuuuuh.

Haaaaaaa.

Huuuuuuuh.

Haaaaaaa.